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AUTHOR Bradley, Stephen J.; Langlois, Suzanne
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a collaborative approach toward preventing and intervening in abusive behaviors among youth. Outdoor leaders may be caught off guard by abusive behavior during outdoor courses and may be uncertain how to work with groups in which such behavior is the norm. The concept of "dominant discourse" is useful for understanding that certain cultural ideas circulate through society and become a cultural force that influences our thinking and behavior. A current dominant discourse suggests that abusive behaviors are normal among teenagers. During one 14-day Outward Bound course, abusive behaviors became a severe problem. In order to avoid the extreme measure of having to expel students, instructors engaged the students in collaborative dialogues, which took the form of individual interviews during their solo time. Questions were developed to facilitate an "externalizing conversation" around the topic of abuse and its effects. These conversations elicited responses and ideas in four areas: naming examples of abuse on the course; naming the "real effects" of abuse on oneself and the group; imagining the "unique outcomes" of an abuse-free course; and developing a personal position statement on abuse. Student responses were documented in a public group journal. Students then collaborated in developing consequences for any further abusive behavior. Students committed themselves to anti-abuse "activism," signed voluntary contracts, and formed an Anti-Abuse Committee. Abuse incidents dropped dramatically. (SV)

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PUTTING ABUSE IN THE HOT SEAT: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO WORKING WITH YOUTH

Stephen J. Bradley
Therapist/Outward Bound Instructor 370 S. Shirkshire Rd. Conway, MA 01341 USA phone: (413) 625-6004

Suzanne Langlois
Outward Bound Instructor c/o HIOBS, L.L. Bean Mountain Center, RFD #2, Box 2180 Sunday River Rd., Bethel, ME 04217, USA phone: (207) 824-3152

Youth Members of an Anti-Abuse Committee
Young men and women members of this committee, formed during an Outward Bound Course, August 1995

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Abstract
This paper/workshop will focus on "naming" social/cultural practices which foster and support abusive behavior among youth. Emphasis will be placed on a collaborative approach in work with young men and women, toward preventing and intervening in verbal, emotional, physical, and sexually abusive behavior in wilderness and community settings.

Increasingly in our work with young men and women, we are challenged to facilitate and maintain both physically and emotionally safe environments. As outdoor leaders, we know it is possible to be caught "off guard" by emotionally volatile issues on our courses. One such issue is that of abusive behavior. In working with youth around the issue of abusive behavior, we are further challenged to distinguish between the "person and the problem" (O' Hanlon, 1994). This challenge prompts a number of questions:

1. What constitutes abusive behavior?
2. How do we open a dialogue around the topic of abusive behavior, with young men and women, without "falling prey" to power struggles or "punitive tactics"?
3. How do we engage in conversations about abuse without colluding with abuse?
4. How do we work with groups where abusive behavior seems to be a "norm"?
5. How do we work around the issue of abusive behavior without "disempowering" the young men and women with whom we work?

Discourse
One useful "lens" through which to address these questions is the concept of "discourse." The idea of discourse has been utilized within the field of "narrative therapy" during the past few years (Weingarten, 1995; White, 1995). Narrative therapy is a form of therapy which examines personal and cultural "meanings, practices, and stories," and their effect on individuals, families, and communities. Kathy Weingarten (1995) cites a definition of discourse as follows:

> "social historian Joan Scott defines [discourse] as a 'historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs' (Scott, 1990, pp. 135-136) that are embedded in institutions, social relationships, and texts. Some discourses are dominant, and others are marginalized through the operation of these mechanisms. This meaning of discourse allows us to make sense of what Jerome Bruner calls the ways that 'culture forms mind'" (Bruner, 1990, p.24).

A primary example of a "dominant discourse" in the U.S.A. is the discourse around "body size and shape." Predominant cultural ideas about body size and shape are circulated through media, and in many ways take the form of a "cultural force" which surrounds and "acts upon" men and (particularly) women. This is to say that discourse is not "neutral" or "objective" but plays an active and influential

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role in our language, meanings, and behavior. One need only browse through the magazines at a supermarket checkout stand to highlight the images about body size and shape which "constitute" this dominant discourse and its very "real effects" on our lives. Therapists have taken to collaborating with (primarily) women to counter the role that this discourse plays in the problems of anorexia and bulamia (Epston, Morris, Maisel, 1995). This represents a powerful form of social and therapeutic work.

Youth and Abusive Behavior

It can be said that there are similarly dominant discourses in circulation about the relationship of youth to abusive behavior. It can be assumed that these discourses, if made explicit, might be partially embodied in the following statements:

1. "A certain amount of name calling and put downs is to be 'expected' between teenagers."
2. "It's 'normal' for young men (in particular), and young women to be verbally abusive to each other; it's just part of how they get along."
3. "It's just a phase they're going through; they'll grow out of this behavior."
4. "It's part of 'teen culture' to call each other names."
5. "They don't really mean those threats; they're just 'kidding'."

A primary example of the circulation of these assumptions within our culture is the television show, "Beavis and Butthead," on MTV. This show epitomizes the appalling way in which young men (in particular) are invited into practices of abusive behavior through name calling, put downs, verbal, sexual, and at times physical, assault. It can be assumed that the "real effects" of this show might include the marginalization of young men and women who would prefer to stand up to these practices of abuse as they occur in our culture. In addition, people of all ages are invited into the perception that such behavior is "normal" for teenagers, thereby participating (unwittingly) in the establishment of an emotionally unsafe "norm."

Putting Abuse in the Hot Seat

Drawing from one example, we will illustrate this "norm," some of its "real effects," and some anti-abuse practices which were developed to counter abusive behavior in one Outward Bound group (eleven 14-15-year-old students, and two mid-late-twenty-xyear-old instructors). To "situate" this material, please note the following:

1. Much of this material was generated during a two-day solo, mid way through a 14-day backpacking and canoeing course (offered through Hurricane Island Outward Bound School, in Maine, USA) during August, 1995.
2. During the first seven days of the course, our group "wrestled" with a great deal of abusive behavior (examples to follow).
3. The abusive behavior on the course was severe enough that the instructors were contemplating having to expel students from the course.
4. The instructors engaged the students in collaborative dialogue, with the hopes of deterring the "extreme measure" of having to expel students.
5. The concept of abuse used by the instructors was "abuse as a continuum of behaviors" rather than only extremely traumatic events. To this end, the following definitions of abuse, excerpted from the "Teen Yellow Pages" (1995) were used to "name" abuse in conversations with students:

   "Emotional Abuse - Continual yelling, put downs, name calling, being totally ignored
   Physical Abuse - Shaking, slapping, punching, biting, hair pulling, kicking, etc.
   Sexual Abuse - Indecent exposure, sexual touching, sexual intercourse (without consent). Often involves threats or harassment."

Dialogues with students took the form of individual interviews during their solo time. The instructors developed a set of questions, meant to facilitate an "externalizing conversation" (White, 1995) around the topic of abuse and its effects on the group. Externalizing conversations have developed as a useful practice within the field of narrative therapy (White, Epston, 1990):

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"[an externalizing conversation] Paves the way for persons to cooperate with each other, to unite in a struggle against the problem, and to escape its influence in their lives and relationships.....Opens up new possibilities for persons to take action to retrieve their lives and relationships from the problem and its influence."

Our intention was to engage the students in collaboration around externalizing and naming a discourse of abusive behavior which "wraps around" young men and women in the USA. In our conversations with students, we hoped to elicit responses, ideas, and input around four specific topics: (1) Naming abuse; (2) Naming abuse's "real effects"; (3) Encouraging students to imagine the "unique outcomes" (White, 1995) of an abuse-free course; and (4) Inviting students to take "public positions" on the issue of abusive behavior. The following are instructor questions, and sample student responses, by topic.

1. Naming Abuse - Question: "Name examples of abuse that you have seen on this course. We are not interested in names of individuals, but rather examples of abuse. Our goal here is to take a look at the abuse that is happening/has happened, and to document this. We are clear here that the 'enemy' is not people on this course, the 'enemy' is abuse.

   Student Responses - Examples of Abuse They had Witnessed (direct quotes):
   Emotional Abuse - "racist and sexist language, such as 'nigger, fag, fairy, dyke' etc."; "name calling, 'stupid, fat, dork, nerd, asshole, bitch, moron' etc."; "'no one can hold that student's weight' (said during rock climbing), etc."
   Physical Abuse - "I'm going to kill you"; "I challenge you to a kick boxing match"; "Push the fat boy off the trail"; "pushing, hitting, gesturing, assault"; "one student hit another student in the leg," etc.
   Sexual Abuse - "You know you want me"; "rubbing against other students"; touching students without consent"; "that jog bra makes you look flat (one male student to female student)"; "looking at other people's bodies and commenting on butt size and leg size," etc.

2. Naming the Effects of Abuse - Questions: "How does the abuse affect you personally? How does it affect the group? What are the effects that you think it has on others who receive it?"

   Student Responses - (examples, again direct quotes):
   "It's really not helping.....it's hurtful to individuals.....you can't have as much fun.....you can't be yourself.....no one can open up or say what they mean or think.....the real issue never gets addressed.....people can't say anything or they'll get beat up.....it puts people down and gets them in the dumps.....decreases confidence.....makes us doubt ourselves and others....."

3. Unique Outcomes Question - "If this course were abuse free, then what new kinds of conversations, actions, etc. would occur?"

   Student Responses (examples, again direct quotes):
   "Hike faster.....work together.....learn to trust one another.....laugh more.....more freedom..... people would be more helpful.....have more fun....."

4. Position Statements on Abuse - Question: "Develop a position on abuse, and document this in a statement of your own words. Do you see abuse as a useful thing, a helpful thing, or not?"

   Student Responses (samples):
   "I think it's wrong. I think it's helped us through hard times because it made us laugh. I'd hate to be the person joked on. It's a cop out to help us get around other things. It's hurting us." - (Female Student)
   "I think it sucks. It doesn't make me feel good, or other people. When someone calls me a name, it's like a chain and one link gets added on and keeps on getting added on until you get tired of

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pulling all this weight. It could be possible that I will break free from abuse. I will try not to put other people down.....I will stick up for other people if someone puts another person down." - (Male Student)

"I feel that abuse doesn't need to happen on this course. There are other ways to deal with people besides abuse." - (Female Student)

"If you really believe in someone, that gives them confidence. I will try to stand up against abuse. Silence can be deadly." - (Male Student)

As instructors, we experienced the process of engaging in these conversations as transforming "the story" of this course from being "firmly in the grasp" of abusive behavior, to identifying and moving against the discourses which support abusive behavior. By engaging young men and women in conversations around this topic, we were "co-creating a dialogic space" (Anderson, 1993) from which a new, more empowering relationship with abusive behavior could emerge. As the instructors, this liberated us from the role of "punitive adults" and placed us in the role of "co-conspirators" against disempowering behavioral practices which had surfaced in the experience of our group. As we integrated the material generated in our conversations with students, the following developments emerged:

1. We documented all student responses in our public group journal. This anchored and solidified an "anti abuse discourse" which had emerged in our meetings with students.
2. To insure accountability to our safety as a group, we used student input to develop consequences for any further abusive behavior:

   "If someone engages in abuse of any type (physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, etc.) that person will agree to leave the group and take a time out. Before they can return to the group, they must formulate an apology with the help of a committee member [see below]. They must say what it was that they said or did that was abusive and apologize to the group. If the person refuses to take a time out, we will stop and stay in one place until they agree to do so, or the person will be isolated from the group until they agree to do so. If anyone threatens violence or commits violence or sexual abuse (physically) on anyone else, that student will be removed from the course or isolated from the group for the remainder of the course, or until the committee sees fit to re-include them. Any incidence of abuse will be documented in the group journal and instructor notes, and (possibly) forwarded to parents and/or other important adults in students' lives at the end of the course."
3. We formed an Anti-Abuse Committee, comprised initially of four students and the instructors who had consistently resisted the "temptation" to engage in abusive behavior throughout the course. This committee met daily for the remainder of the course, to identify and discuss further concerns around abusive behavior, and to develop anti-abuse plans and practices to address these concerns. These meetings were open to all, and any student could be nominated to membership in the committee by other students, (based on their anti-abuse "activism") as the course progressed.

To symbolize our commitment against abuse, we put on commitment bracelets (colored parachute cord), and signed a group "anti-abuse contract" (excerpted below). Student anti-abuse commitments, and participation in this contract were voluntary. All members of the group participated wholeheartedly.

"We are opposed to abuse and will support ourselves and each other in standing up against it. Ways that we will do this include calling Anti-Abuse group circle-ups; attending Anti Abuse meetings; forming an Anti Abuse Committee; taking time outs and supporting others in their time outs; reporting and documenting abuse.....being strong, not giving up, and not backing down.....our course will be much happier, safer, and more fun and productive when we end abuse. We will stay strong and fight back. Silence is deadly."

By the end of the course, all students had been successfully nominated to the Anti-Abuse Committee, and the daily occurrence of name calling, put downs, or other forms of abusive behavior had dropped from approx 20 incidents/day (first day after solo) to five incidents per day.

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Summary

When young men and women are presented with the opportunity to "re-story" their lives in relation to the dominant discourses which surround them, they (not surprisingly) rise to the occasion. Perhaps this tells us something about the degree to which we feel the "silent but pervasive" influences of the discourses which permeate our daily lives. Whether in a community or wilderness context, students are faced with the choices inherent in "following the path" that is embodied in cultural assumptions and practices about their lives, or resisting the influence of these assumptions and practices. Collaborating with students fosters a "dialogic space" in which new ideas can emerge to counter the dominant stories in our lives. Whether about abuse, or other issues, this act can be liberating.

Wilderness settings provide a unique opportunity for the development of new "ways of being." We hope that in our efforts, new developments and "unique outcomes" transfer back into the community-based lives of students. We assume by the following quotes, taken several months after this course, that members of the Anti Abuse Committee formed on the course continue to develop and implement anti-abuse practices in their post-Outward Bound lives:

> "when you do break the silence, you're not only saving yourself, you can feel good that you did something for somebody else, whether it be standing up for sexual harassment, that somebody else won't have to deal with that you had to deal with, or [other forms of abuse]. It all depends on what position you're in, but I think that everybody should just fight for it. It feels so much better....."
>
> -Female Student, November 1995

> "it's like now, if someone is being picked on and can't really stick up for themselves, I'll stick up for them.....I still have the bracelet on...it kind of reminds me, you know."
>
> -Male Student, May 1996

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